



Buying Broadband

The days of dial-up modems are numbered: broadband is now available across virtually the whole country. But with so much choice, which package should you pick? **Xavier Cortez** considers the best deals

Broadband internet access is no longer a niche product for wealthy, geographically blessed people. According to BT, 99 per cent of homes and businesses can receive an asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL), and deals are available for just £10 per month. So why make do with dial-up? There's never been a better time to get broadband and discover online music and games, and fast, always-on web browsing.

Here we look at the broadband packages available to UK residential customers. There are 154 companies currently vying for your business, so we've concentrated on the major players, plus the odd smaller company that offers something different. In forthcoming issues of *Shopper*, we'll bring you a beginner's guide to home networking and show you how to share your broadband connection around the house and how to use your high-speed, always-on connection to best effect. Meanwhile, here's how to find a great deal.

BROADLY SPEAKING

There are two main ways to get broadband in your home: ADSL, which uses normal telephone lines, and cable, which uses the cable telephone/TV network. BT pioneered ADSL in the UK and most ADSL deals use BT's ADSL infrastructure. However, BT no longer has a monopoly on ADSL. After some persuasion from Ofcom, BT has allowed other companies into local exchanges to install their own ADSL hardware, giving them direct access to the telephone cables that run to people's homes. This is known as local loop unbundling, a confusing name that's often shortened to LLU. LLU has shaken up the ADSL market with cheaper and faster services than those deals based on BT's ADSL network.

The cable broadband market is simpler, with just two companies in the UK: NTL and Telewest. Their networks don't overlap, so only one will be available in your street. Cable broadband is available at comparable speeds and prices to ADSL. Choosing between them depends on what phone deal you prefer and your broadband requirements.

FINE LINE

ADSL uses normal telephone lines, so suppliers insist you have an active telephone account.

This usually means you'll need to be a BT phone customer to get ADSL. However, East Yorkshire residents with Kingston Communications phone lines can also get ADSL from Kingston. Meanwhile, Bulldog requires you to transfer your phone line to get its LLU ADSL service. Telewest and most NTL deals don't require you to sign up to a phone or TV package, but it can be good value to do so anyway.

ADSL is available for 99 per cent of UK homes and businesses, though this is little comfort to the remaining one per cent. Users must be within a three-and-a-half kilometre radius of an ADSL-enabled exchange. As such, it's possible that ADSL will never be available in certain locations. Still, if you've previously tried and failed to sign up, it's worth trying again. A new technology, rate adaptive digital subscriber line (RADSL), extends the range to around five-and-a-half kilometres. You can check the availability for your address by visiting www.broadbandchecker.co.uk.

ADSL from LLU suppliers isn't as widely available. These companies have only recently started installing their hardware in local telephone exchanges. UK Online, which uses Easynet's LLU infrastructure, is available on about 20 per cent of the UK's local telephone exchanges. It also offers ADSL via BT hardware, but at higher prices. LLU is a fast-moving market, though: Easynet has announced the unbundling of a further 100 exchanges, making the total around 30 per cent.

THE NEED FOR SPEED

Even if your telephone line is within range for a particular service, there's no guarantee you'll get it. Providers can have long waiting lists, particularly after launching an aggressively priced deal. And while 1Mbit/s and faster ADSL is now common, these higher speeds are dependent on the quality of the signal between your modem and the local exchange. Bulldog Communications offers download bandwidths of "up to 8Mbit/s" as standard. However, a representative for the company told us: "The maximum operating speed... depends on a number of factors including line length, cable gauges, noise in the cable and home wiring. The system automatically adapts... to offer the maximum speed possible... for that individual user's line." This means signal quality

may reduce your 8Mbit/s connection to 512Kbit/s; this is true for any ADSL service.

ADSL speeds also depend on contention ratios. This is the maximum number of users on your local exchange that share your bandwidth. Consider a 512Kbit/s service with a 50:1 contention ratio. If you and 49 similarly equipped neighbours download a large file at the same time, your connection speed drops to just 10Kbit/s, slower than dial-up. We've found services with a 50:1 contention ratio still perform close to maximum speed, but at busy times services with lower contention ratios might see better performance.

SELL AWARE

Broadband providers structure their pricing according to two key variables: connection speed and monthly use limit. However, other factors such as BT Broadband's telephone support costs or PlusNet's maximum file size download limit also come into consideration.

Download speeds vary from 512Kbit/s to 8Mbit/s, with uploads generally fixed at 256Kbit/s. A typical 4MB MP3 download takes one minute on a 512Kbit/s connection and just four seconds at 8Mbit/s, assuming in each case that the full bandwidth is available. As we went to press, NTL announced that it will be upgrading all its broadband customers to a 10Mbit/s service, starting with the 3Mbit/s customers. However, these upgrades are scheduled for completion at the end of 2006, by which time faster, cheaper ADSL could also be available.

Monthly bandwidth limits vary even more. Lixxus's LixxStart2000 includes no bandwidth as standard, charging users per megabyte in place of a monthly fee. At the opposite extreme, AOL, Telewest and UK Online have no limit on monthly use. Other companies cap monthly use on certain packages to anything from 1GB to 30GB, while Bulldog's cheaper deals have an eight-hour limit. A 1GB per month limit is plenty for normal web browsing and email, but if you download music, videos or software, listen to internet radio or play online games regularly, you probably need more.

Suppliers also vary their procedure for customers who exceed their monthly limit. Some charge per GB for excess bandwidth, usually at reasonable rates; some reduce the speed of the connection; and others will urge you to move to a different suitable package. Strangely, Wanadoo is yet to implement a system for measuring use. At present, there's no practical difference between its £18 and £28 monthly deals.

You should also look out for sign-up fees and whether the hardware you require is supplied. If not, a Universal Serial Bus (USB) modem will cost around £30, with wireless ADSL routers starting at around £70 (see this month's *Upgrade Shopper*). Minimum contract lengths also vary. Don't sign up to a 12-month contract if you're thinking of moving, as contracts often can't be transferred.

PERFECT PACKAGE

Armed with this knowledge and the table opposite, you should be able to find your ideal package. One final piece of advice, though: check www.adslguide.org.uk and www.theregister.co.uk for news of broadband suppliers that are receiving more than their fair share of complaints. There's no point in having a lightning-fast, bargain service if it's unreliable and no-one answers your calls. ☐



COMPANY	AOL	BULLDOG COMMUNICATIONS	BT BROADBAND LIXXUS	NTL	PIPEX	PLUSNET	TELEWEST BROADBAND	TISCALI UK	UK ONLINE	WANADOO
DEALS (WHERE UNSPECIFIED DOWN AND UP SPEEDS ARE AS LISTED BELOW)										
	Broadband Silver 512Kbit/s down, £18/month	Start@active 8hrs/month, £15.50/month	BT Broadband Basic five email addresses, 1GB/month, 50p/min support, £18/month	1MB Broadband 1Mbit/s down, 100Kbit/s up, 3GB/month, £18/month	Lite 2000 2Mbit/s down, 256Kbit/s up, 2GB/month, £20	Broadband Pay As You Go 2Mbit/s down, 1GB/month, 250MB web space, 250MB file download limit, £15/month	Broadband 512Kbit/s down, 128Kbit/s up, £18/month	512KB 512Kbit/s down, 30CB monthly limit, £15/month	Broadband 512Kbit/s down, 256Kbit/s up, £10/month	Standard User 2CB/month, £18/month
	Broadband Gold 1Mbit/s down, £25/month	Call@active 8hrs/month, free UK landline calls, £27.50/month	BT Broadband five email addresses, 15GB/month, free support, £25/month	2Mb Broadband 2Mbit/s down, 200Kbit/s up, 30CB/month, £25/month	Solo 1000 1Mbit/s down, 256Kbit/s up, £23	Broadband Plus 2Mbit/s down, 100MB web space, 100MB file download limit, £15/month	Broadband complete 1Mbit/s down, 128Kbit/s up, £25/month	2MB Summer Special 2Mbit/s down, 2CB monthly limit, £16/month	Broadband 1000 1Mbit/s down, 256Kbit/s up, £15/month	Active User 6GB/month, £23/month
	Broadband Platinum 2Mbit/s down, £30/month	Inter@active Unlimited access, £29.50/month	BT Yahoo! Broadband 11 email addresses, 15GB/month, 3p/min support, £27/month	3MB Broadband 3Mbit/s down, 300Kbit/s up, 30CB/month, £38/month	Lite 2000 2Mbit/s down, 256Kbit/s up, 5GB/month, £23	Broadband Premier 2Mbit/s down, 250MB web space, 250MB file download limit, £2.1/month	Broadband elite-2mb 2Mbit/s down, 256Kbit/s up, £35/month	2MB 2Mbit/s down, 15CB monthly limit, £18/month	Broadband 2000 2Mbit/s down, 256Kbit/s up, £20/month	Heavy User 30CB/month, £28/month
		Super@active Unlimited access, free UK landline calls, £41.50/month	BT Yahoo! Broadband 11 email addresses, 30CB/month, 3p/min support, £30/month		Lite 2000 2Mbit/s down, 256Kbit/s up, 15CB/month, £28	Broadband Premier 4Mbit/s down, 250MB web space, 250MB file download limit, £30/month	Broadband elite-4mb 4Mbit/s down, 386Kbit/s up, £50/month		Broadband 8000 8Mbit/s down, 400Kbit/s up, £30/month	Orange Mobile 2CB/ month, £10/month, Orange mobile customers only
SPECIFICATIONS										
Technology	ADSL	ADSL (LLU)	ADSL	Cable	ADSL	ADSL (LLU)	Cable	ADSL	ADSL (LLU)	ADSL
Download speed	512Kbit/s, 1Mbit/s, 2Mbit/s	8Mbit/s	2Mbit/s	1Mbit/s, 2Mbit/s	1Mbit/s, 2Mbit/s	2Mbit/s, 4Mbit/s, 8Mbit/s	512Kbit/s, 1Mbit/s, 2Mbit/s, 4Mbit/s	512Kbit/s to 2Mbit/s	512Kbit/s, 1Mbit/s, 2Mbit/s, 8Mbit/s	2Mbit/s
Upload speed	256Mbit/s	400Kbit/s	256Kbit/s	100Kbit/s, 200Kbit/s, 300Kbit/s	256Kbit/s	256Kbit/s	128Kbit/s, 256Mbit/s, 386Kbit/s	256Kbit/s	256Kbit/s, 400Kbit/s	256Kbit/s
Charges/restrictions for exceeding bandwidth (where applicable)	N/A	Additional time charged at £1.50/hour	Broadband Basic £4 for up to 3CB, £8 for up to 6CB, £12 for more than 6CB. Other deals: "You will not need to take any action"	LixxStart: 5p/MB up to 300MB, then 2.3p/CB to £45 price cap. StartFlex: 1CB/month, then 2.3p/CB to price cap	Downloads reduced to 48Kbit/s, uploads to 32Kbit/s	Pay As You Go deal: additional bandwidth at £1.25/CB or £1/CB prepay	N/A	Additional use charged at £1.50/CB	N/A	Currently unmeasured by Wanadoo
Contention ratio	50:1	N/A	50:1	N/A	50:1	50:1	N/A	25:1	33:1	50:1
COST INC VAT										
Supplied hardware	USB modem	Current offer: USB modem (usually £35)	USB modem (online orders only)	USB/Ethernet modem	USB Modem	None	USB/Ethernet modem	USB Modem	None	USB modem
Sign-up/installation fee	Free	Current offer: £1 (usually £60)	Free	Free	Free	Free: £11.75 for one month contract	Free	Free	Free	Free
Introductory offers		1st month free; five months around £10 off per month; free phone line for first six months	40 free iTunes; £2 off for three months on Basic and Yahoo! deals	1MB Broadband at £10/month for first year when taken with certain NTL phone deals	Solo 1000 at £15/month for three months	None	512Kbit/s and digital TV for £15/month for one year, 1Mbit/s and digital TV for £20/month for three months	None	None	VoiP adaptor providing free evening and weekend calls: free for six months, then £4/month
Standard monthly fee	£18, £25, £30	£15.50, £27.50, £29.50, £41.50	£18, £25, £27, £30	£18, £25, £38	£15 to £34	£15 to £40	£18, £25, £35, £50	£15, £16, £18	£10, £15, £20, £30	£10, £18, £23, £28
Minimum contract period	One year	One month	One year	One year	One month	One year	One year	One year	One year	One year
Migrations supported	Inbound and outbound	Inbound and outbound	Inbound and outbound	N/A	Inbound and outbound	Inbound and outbound	N/A	Inbound and outbound	Inbound and outbound	Outbound
Telephone support (hours, £/min)	8am-midnight, local call	8am-8pm Mon-Fri 9am-6pm Sat-Sun, free	24-hour, 3p/min, (50p/min on Basic deal)	8am-8pm, local call	9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm Sat, local call	24-hour, local call	24-hour, local call	National call	24-hour, local call	24-hour, national call
EXTRAS										
Email technology	POP3	POP3	POP3	POP3	POP3, webmail	POP3/IMAP/webmail	POP3/IMAP/webmail	Webmail	POP3/IMAP/webmail	POP3/webmail
Number of email inboxes	Seven	Four	Five or 11	15	Three	Unlimited	Five	Six	10	One
Inbox size (per address)	Not disclosed	10MB	2CB	N/A	100MB	250MB	30MB	100MB	200MB or 1,500 messages	100MB
Server-based anti-spam and/or anti-virus	AOL spam filtering, McAfee firewall	Virus and spam protection	Virus, spyware and spam protection	Virus and spam protection	None	Virus and spam protection	Virus and spam protection	Tiscali SecureMail anti-spam and anti-virus controls	SpamFilter anti-spam, ChildCheck parental controls	Virus and spam protection
Web space	140MB	20MB	None; 15MB with BT Yahoo! deals	55MB	None	100MB or 250MB, CGI scripts, MySQL/PHP/perl facilities	30MB free; 100MB with CGI support for £4/month	100MB	10MB (unlimited expansion for non-business use), CGI (email/forms) and FrontPage support	Five sites, 30MB each
Free domain	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Additional features	Exclusive content	Free Bulldog-to-Bulldog calls, free voicemail	None	Static IP	None	Static IP, fax2email	Exclusive online content	Exclusive content	None	None
Restrictions	BT line required	Compulsory telephone service, £10.50/month line rental	BT line required	None	BT line required	Website downloads limited to 100MB or 250MB, BT line required	None	BT line required	BT line required	BT line required
CONTACT DETAILS										
Phone	0800 279 9327	08000 151617	0800 800150	0800 183 0123	Web only	0845 142 0200	0845 142 0220	0800 107 9000	0800 053 4500	0870 010 2462
Website	www.aol.co.uk/broadband	www.bulldogbroadband.com	www.btbroadband.com	wwwntl.com	www.pipex.com	www.plus.net	www.telewest.co.uk	www.tiscali.co.uk	www.ukonline.net	www.wanadoo.co.uk/time